

# Shoprite/Checkers strike

## Workers, not permanents or casuals

In labour circles people often express dismay at the decrease in worker solidarity in comparison to the 1980s. A strike at Shoprite by members of the SA Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) shows differently. **Kally Forrest** spoke to strikers who explain that unity in the retail sector is alive and well.



“**W**here was absolute unity. They see themselves as workers not as permanents or casuals. They will no longer fall into that management trap and be divided.” So spoke Thokozile Mchunu, a national shopsteward and permanent employee at Shoprite Southdale of the recent Shoprite strike.

This is a big achievement considering that an *SALB* article by Bridget Kenny based on research in 2001 outlined deep solidarity problems between permanent and casual workers. Saccawu after hesitating for some years has now begun to come to grips with the difficult task of organising casuals in the retail sector. It was a matter of doing or dying for the union as about 60% of workers at Shoprite are casuals.

Permanents work a 45 hour week while casuals have changing schedules and hours. In 2003 a

landmark strike by mainly casuals focused on hours of work where some were doing an eight hour week. The union struck an agreement that within two years all workers would be on a minimum 40 hour week. This was achieved in some stores but in others hours vary and in stores such as Checkers Emmarentia and Checkers Setsing, workers do a 24 hour week.

On 10 August, all 35 000 Shoprite members struck nationally for a long two months. “When they learnt that Shoprite CEO Whitey Basson had paid himself a 30% increase on his 2005 bonus of R59 million, workers were prepared to go on striking forever,” remarked Mchunu. In addition to Saccawu members, a large number of non-unionised workers joined the strike. Shoprite employs 52 000 workers overall.

The strikers’ main demands were for an across the board increase of R450 per month or 10% whichever was the greater. During the strike

this demand dropped to R300 or a 10% increase. The lowest paid were earning R980 per month.

A second core demand which affected casual workers was for the provision of two uniforms. Shoprite provides two uniforms and R16 per month for soap powder to wash uniforms for permanents. Casuals have to buy their own. The union also aimed to extend all benefits enjoyed by permanents to casuals some of whom have worked at Shoprite for 18 years. The company did not grant long service, staff discounts, bonuses or funeral benefits to casuals.

### COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

The long strike held fast across the country except in Mpumalanga where only half the workers came out. “Even some key shop stewards were working so how could you expect general members to stay away? This is the first time that this has happened in this region so the

union is going to investigate what the problem is," commented Mchunu.

In *SALB 30.4* Martin Jansen, speaking of violence in the security strike, cautioned that if unions want to prevent strike violence they need to carefully prepare beforehand. This is what Saccawu did.

Some time before the strike, in July when workers were staging lunch-time pickets, the union invited organisations who may lend solidarity to meetings in different communities. The SACP and other members of the alliance, the Young Communist League, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), civic organisations such as the Soweto Civic Association, taxi associations and church groups were invited. "Not everyone who we invited came," said Mchunu, "but enough came to make a difference during the strike." Thereafter Saccawu held briefings with these groups from time to time.

The result of these approaches was a range of solidarity actions. The APF organised their own solidarity march to highlight workers' demands moving from Shoprite Protea to Shoprite Naledi in Soweto. In KwaZulu-Natal a number of taxi drivers refused to allow shoppers carrying Shoprite packets into their taxis. Some taxis who parked opposite supermarkets would see shoppers emerge from stores and would not allow them to enter their taxis.

Shopstewards met with Satawu (SA Transport & Allied Workers Union) members from Metro Rail who promised to transport strikers to picket lines in Gauteng free of charge. Members of the Communist Youth League in particular, as well

as SACP members, often joined picket lines. Samwu (SA Municipal Workers Union) delegates left their 9th National Congress to join pickets, and Popcru (Police & Prisons Civil Rights Union) and Satawu members also joined marches and pickets. At some supermarkets Samwu Piki Tup members refused to collect rubbish which created a filthy environment around shops.

The Cosatu 9th Congress in September passed a resolution on giving support to Shoprite strikers. The Cosatu office bearers invited Shoprite management to attend the Congress so they could present it with a brick as a symbol of building a better relationship with its workers. Management declined to attend, so the Shoprite national chairperson passed it onto HR director, Kalie Becker, at CCMA talks.

#### STRIKER SOLIDARITY

Solidarity amongst strikers who were struggling to make ends meet was also marked. "I went down to a picket line on a cold day. Suddenly a worker arrived with a big bucket of soup and for ten cents dished it out with bread to strikers," recalls Mchunu. If workers were short of money, others would contribute. At Southdale, for example, when a landlord threatened to evict a striker from his home for non-payment, impoverished strikers clubbed together and paid the rent.

This was a far cry from the 2003 strike which was mainly waged by casuals. Here solidarity from permanents was patchy. It took place in November and permanents were worried about losing their bonuses. This time everyone downed tools and it occurred



earlier in the year.

Reasons for the growing solidarity vary. Over the last couple of years Saccawu has worked hard at recruiting casuals particularly as the company claimed it had no right to bargain on their behalf. Casuals were often young, inexperienced and lacking in knowledge about unions so Saccawu educated and informed and brought in large numbers.

With increased membership Saccawu was able in 2005 to claim the right to bargain on behalf of both casual and permanent labour. Bringing casuals into the bargaining unit immediately began to unite workers.

An outcome of the 2003 strike was the right for casuals to become shop stewards and represent those who worked unsocial hours. These shop stewards accrued experience and are now able to represent permanent workers to management. "Permanents started to have confidence in casuals' ability to represent them whereas previously they had to solve casuals' problems." The union now has its first casual national negotiator, Lebogang Masakane, from the Western Transvaal.

Just prior to the strike at the

Eldorado Shoprite management brought in replacement labour and demanded that permanents train them. They refused and were dismissed. At Southdale new workers were also brought in some time before the strike and staff unknowingly trained them only to recognise them later as scab labour. During the strike, a Southdale management retrenched 34 permanents for resisting work outside of normal trading hours – work which is normally done by casuals. In both these cases workers are waiting for the outcome of CCMA hearings.

In the absence of these permanent workers and their shop stewards, casual workers have refused to allow management to take advantage of the situation. A number of casuals have become acting shop stewards who are assisted by worker negotiators and according to Mchunu, “are managing very well.”

#### PICKET POWER AND PROBLEMS

Picketing outside stores to discourage shoppers from entering has always been Saccawu’s strongest strike weapon. According to Vuyisile Manchu, a casual at Shoprite Southdale, approaching shoppers outside supermarkets and explaining the strike was useful in preventing customers from crossing the picket line.

“Local blacks were the least likely to go into the store while many whites answered with statements like ‘It’s not our business’. Some blacks were very arrogant though, especially as Shoprite was advertising specials in the newspaper and TV all the time and people wanted those specials. It was also difficult with foreign

blacks. If you gave them a pamphlet explaining the strike, they would say, ‘We don’t understand, you must write this in our language.’” Foreign nationals crossing picket lines was a problem especially in Hillbrow and Yeoville.

Strikers at a KwaZulu-Natal store developed an innovative way of dealing with management ‘specials’. When Shoprite advertised braai packs at much reduced rates customers started to flock in. Strikers quickly hired loud hailers and walked in the rain urging shoppers not to buy these packs and explaining why. This was highly effective as potential shoppers heard the call from some distance away.

Picket rules came under constant dispute. At the beginning of the strike guidelines agreed upon at the CCMA stipulated six picketers inside the store, six on either side of the entrance and the remainder would stand in demarcated areas agreed by both parties.

Fairly soon management went to court to remove the six picketers inside the store and to remove pickets from immediately outside the entrance. The court ruled that strikers must stand 25 metres away. This was challenged by the union although as Mchunu comments, “It had its uses because you could approach customers long before they even got to the entrance and persuade them not to go in.” The compromise reached was ten metres from the entrance.

Strikers developed innovative ways of dealing with the 25 metre restriction when it was in force. At Shoprite Naledi they brought their children to stand outside the entrance with placards like, “Give our parents an increase” and “Our

parents deserve better”. Many shoppers turned away and the police felt unable to move against the children.

The union, as in previous strikes, had problems with pickets in malls. Pickets had to be contained exactly outside Shoprite. “If you say, spilled over to Mr Price next door, the manager would come out and say, ‘Move from my door. I’m not having a dispute with you.’”

The problem of where to picket in a mall, besides a few workers ten metres from the entrance, was not resolved. The premises are owned by landlords and not Shoprite so they ban pickets and get security to implement this. The union has engaged Nedlac around the issue but with little success. Strikers were forced to picket outside malls but the many entrances made this difficult.

The union also faced problems with police ignorance of picketing laws. “Some police were well informed and did not harass us but others made life very difficult for us,” recalls Mchunu. Saccawu wrote to Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi to ask for a meeting to discuss this, but he didn’t reply.

The ‘red ants’, which are contracted by the municipality and wear red overalls, were even more difficult to deal with. They openly attacked picket lines using crow bars, especially in the Western Cape. A worker lost an eye, others emerged with deep gashes on their heads, some were critically injured. In response strikers met with Safety and Security MECs but the response was uneven – some helpful, some not.

#### STRIKE OUTCOME

In the ninth week after two weeks